



Why Did France Move So Forcefully on Libya?

By PIERRE TRAN

PARIS — France's early insistence on the need to act militarily against Libya has led many to ask why Paris acted so forcefully.

Critics of French president Nicolas Sarkozy say he acted for domestic reasons, prodded by a temperament that thrives on the thrill of the spectacular gesture. This is his love of the "diplomatic blitzkrieg," the lightning strike that leaves other leaders in the dust.

"Sarkozy took the initiative for internal domestic reasons," said Pierre Conesa, an economic intelligence consultant.

Conesa said the Libya move was intended to make up for blunders early this year by then-foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie over Tunisia and the government's slowness to respond to the Egyptian street revolution.

Sarkozy acted on his own in 2008 when he brokered a cease-fire between Russia and Georgia, after Moscow sent troops and tanks in to back up a separatist movement in the Abkhazia region.

"Sometimes the initiative works, but what are the consequences?" Conesa asked.

Sarkozy's highly personal approach to world affairs has drawn fire from professional diplomats. The daily newspaper *Le Monde* ran an open letter Feb. 22 from the Marly group of active and retired diplomats, which criticized what it saw as the "amateurism, impulsiveness and short-term media preoccupations" that drove the presidency in world politics.

"Our Rafale planes and nuclear industry rest on the shelf," the letter said. "More seriously, France's voice has disappeared from the

world."

The role of philosopher and writer Bernard Henri-Lévy, who persuaded Sarkozy to take up the cause of the Libyan resistance, is seen by critics as a form of celebrity diplomacy.

The Libya intervention is an "overreaction which shows Sarkozy's impulsive personality," said Louis Gautier, professor at Lyon University and head of the Orion defense think tank.

Well-intentioned but poor at executing, Sarkozy has annoyed the allies, Gautier said.

"Every time he sees a window of opportunity to play a personal game, he goes for it," he said. "The problem is that policy success is a long term."

Sarkozy is coming to the end of his presidential term and wants to leave a strong legacy in upholding human rights, Gautier said.

As evidence to what Gautier calls "narrow-mindedness," Sarkozy excluded Turkey — a Muslim country, a major regional player, NATO member and owner of highly capable military assets — from the March 19 Libya crisis summit. The absence of African countries from the summit was also a missed opportunity, Gautier said.

Also in the mix of motives, there is the desire to show that France counts for something in the world, that it can play a leading military role in Europe, that its air force and navy are capable of brilliant feats of arms, Gautier said.

In the balance, the reality of the human rights abuses committed by the Tripoli government must also be weighed, Gautier said.

Other analysts said Sarkozy grasped that need for action to protect the people from their own government.



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Deadly Force: A French Rafale fighter takes off from the French aircraft carrier Charles De Gaulle on its way for a mission to Libya on March 25.

"There was urgency in the face of the real threat of a blood bath," said Camille Grand, head of the think tank *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*. The risk was a massacre of civilians by the Libyan army as it closed on Benghazi, the center of the resistance. The action has been largely appreciated by public opinion, Grand said.

France also wanted to show that it was not hostile to the transformation sweeping the Arab world — that Paris did not stand for the status quo following the government's slowness in responding to the pro-democracy movement first in Tunisia, then Egypt, Grand said.

The intervention has also put into concrete action the defense cooperation between Britain and France, he said.

Loïc Tribot La Spiere, head of the think tank *Centre d'Etude Prospective Stratégique*, said the Libya move showed that France joined Britain as a major defense player in Europe, and that other countries had shown themselves to be "fol-

lowers."

The use of force in Libya showed the primacy of the need to protect a population over that of territorial sovereignty, Tribot La Spiere said.

In the United Nations, that concept is known as "responsibility to protect," a bitter lesson in the absence of international concern when some 800,000 Rwandans were massacred in three months in a 1994 civil war.

The Mediterranean's proximity to France meant Paris had every reason to take action, analysts said. □

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